



Essay #3



"AIDS does not discriminate; it affects everyone."

By Leilani Laureano

I was one of those people whose knowledge of HIV/AIDS was close to zero. Gay people are the only ones with AIDS, right? I was more in denial than ignorant. I did not know anyone with AIDS nor had I ever met anyone, so AIDS had never affected me. That is until I met Dee Cruz. I looked at this project as an amazing opportunity to be a part of a ground-breaking series, but I was not prepared for the impact.

AIDS does not discriminate; it affects everyone. At the 2008 United States Conference in Fort Lauderdale, I learned the reality of AIDS in the Hispanic community. The conference was a huge eye opener. I am extremely grateful for being able to attend the conference and listen to the great speakers. I even interviewed a few of them.

I can only speak for Hispanics about AIDS awareness, and it is non-existent. Hispanics are too proud and ignorant to speak up against AIDS. I was never told about HIV/AIDS growing up at home. Sex was rarely talked about at all.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a serious threat to the Hispanic/Latino community. One in six people living with HIV in the U.S. today is Hispanic, yet AIDS is still not commonly discussed in many households. Hispanics/Latinos comprise 15 percent of the US population; however, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, they account for 17 percent of all new HIV infections occurring in the United States. In 2006 Hispanics/Latinos accounted for 19 percent of new AIDS diagnoses and 19 percent of all people living with AIDS in the 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2006. Of the rates of AIDS diagnoses for adults and adolescents of all races/ethnicities, the second highest (after the rate for blacks) was the rate for Hispanics/Latinos. Hispanics/Latinos accounted for 16 percent of the estimated 982,498 AIDS cases diagnosed since the beginning of the epidemic. By the end of 2006, an estimated 80,690 Hispanics/Latinos with AIDS in the 50 states and the District of Columbia had died. And the numbers keep getting worse every year.

With the high numbers of HIV/AIDS affecting the Hispanic community one would think there would be increase awareness, right? No, you're wrong. HIV/AIDS awareness in the Hispanic community is extremely low. Without this project, I would have never known about the increase of the epidemic within my own community. In the Hispanic community, AIDS is a

taboo. They think the only people with AIDS are gays, drug addicts or prostitutes. This thinking is why HIV/AIDS is growing in the Hispanic community. People believe it is impossible to contract HIV/AIDS if they do not fall into one of those categories. There are more Hispanic males than females with HIV/AIDS, but the males are too *machista* (proud) to confront it. They have the misconception that “it can’t happen to me.” Then there are people like Dee, who had sex once but with the wrong person.

Dee’s story broke my heart the first time I heard it and again when I met her. She is the opposite of everything I think of when I think of this disease. She is healthy, optimistic and beautiful. Meeting Dee, I only asked myself, “Why her?” Dee washed away every notion I had about HIV/AIDS patients. Dee is probably the strongest person I know. She not only has come to terms with her disease but shares it with the public. She wants to get the word out to the Hispanic community that HIV/AIDS can happen to anyone. She is putting to rest all previous notions of HIV/AIDS within the Hispanic community. She is not gay, a drug addict or a prostitute. Honestly, if I were Dee I would be angry at the world, stay home and cry. I know she was like that for a while, but now talking to others has helped her as much as she has helped others. One of Dee’s main ideas is not to trust anyone. I know people always say don’t trust anyone, but I know what Dee is saying is totally true. It does not matter how many times that person told you he or she is not positive -- make sure. Go get tested with them.

The most important lesson I learned was that HIV/AIDS can happen to anyone and I cannot trust anyone. The impact of this project and Dee’s personal experience has changed me forever. I will no longer have the misconceptions of HIV/AIDS patients. I will be informed and, just like Dee, I will try to bring to light the epidemic occurring in the Hispanic community.